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MANILA FOR USADB EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
TREASURY FOR S. CHUN
EB FOR D. EBERLY
SA/INS FOR C. SIM AND M. GOWER

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: PROSPECTS FOR REFORM DOMINATE DISCUSSIONS IN
MALDIVES

REF: COLOMBO 1621

11. (SBU) Summary: DCM and Econchief visited Maldives September 14 and 15 and found newly-appointed cabinet members eager to move forward with a bold reform agenda, while members of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) continue to regroup following the August 12-13 demonstrations and related arrests. The constitutional reform process, while edging forward, is hampered by continued procedural debate in the Special Majlis (parliament). The slow pace of reform has prompted the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) to question the GORM's commitment to the democratic process while government officials question whether the MDP has the patience necessary to operate in a democratic framework. Dedicated but overworked Finance Ministry officials agreed to work with us to get the U.S. tsunami assistance agreement in final during October. The Ambassador and other country team members will raise democracy and human rights issues while in Male? next week for the first-ever U.S.-Maldives Friendship Week. End Summary.

12. (SBU) During a September 14-15 visit to Maldives, DCM and Econchief met with the newly-appointed Ministers of Justice, Home Affairs, and Atoll Development, as well as the Defense Minister, the Attorney General, the Chief of Police, the Deputy Finance Minister, the Deputy Minister of the Tourism Ministry, the (disenchanted) head of the Human Rights Commission and representatives of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP).

New Cabinet Members Largely Young, Very Dynamic

13. (SBU) Newly-appointed Justice Minister Mohamed Jameel Ali and Home Affairs Minister Ahmed Tasmeen Ali join a cabinet that is growing younger and more dynamic as President Gayoom continues to make changes in an effort to prompt progress in the Special Majlis (parliament) that is considering constitutional reforms. New Atoll Development Minister (and longstanding US Embassy contact) Mohammed Waheed Deen (a former member of the Maldivian Human Rights Commission and a prominent businessman), while not a member of the younger generation, was clearly enthusiastic about his role in bringing reform to the outlying atolls and spoke energetically about replacing atoll and island chiefs (roughly the equivalent of mayors), currently appointed by the President, with elected officials and devolving power and budget authority away from Male? and out to the various atolls.

14. (SBU) Jameel outlined an ambitious effort to revamp the Justice Ministry, introduce judicial reform, establish a national bar and accreditation process and seek training for judges trained in both Commonwealth and Sharia law. Tasmeen Ali was keen to continue to develop the capacity of the national police force, which was split from the National Security Service (Maldives? military) late last year. He also outlined plans to develop a separate, well-trained prison service and to construct a new prison on Maahfushi Island, noting that the current prison there, in which prisoners are kept in large common areas rather than smaller cells, makes it almost impossible to control or remove individual prisoners. He noted that his ministry, as part of the GORM decision to invite the ICRC in to look at prison conditions, will work from ICRC standards as it designs the new prison.

Growing Pains for Human Rights and Democracy

15. (SBU) Attorney General Hassan Saeed, who has been pursuing ambitious reforms since assuming his position a year ago, continues to push this agenda. He is developing a ?reform road map? (which he claimed would be available in English in the next ?two to three weeks?) and plans to introduce a full range of judicial reform bills in the upcoming Special Majlis (parliament) session beginning

October 1 as well as a ?police act? that would codify procedures and responsibilities for the newly-independent police force. When queried about detainees arrested on August 12, Saeed said that most had been released, with approximately 30 remaining in custody, having been charged with various crimes.

16. (SBU) Defense Minister Ismael Shafeeu discussed the challenges of trying to confront and quash the growth of radical Islam, while allowing appropriate democratic dissent to flourish now that political parties are legal. He said ?Bangladesh has scared us a lot? (Note: a reference to the recent coordinated bombings around Bangladesh. End Note). Shafeeu discussed the upcoming release of ?Sheikh Farid,? a Qatar-educated Islamic fundamentalist detained several years ago for suspected terrorist activities. Shafeeu said Farid, who ?we have to release since his sentence is up,? would be monitored closely, to see if he would join forces with the MDP or one of the newly formed Islamic parties and to see if he continued to foment his radical Islamic ideology. In that vein, Shafeeu, as well as several other interlocutors, expressed concern over the new (and legal) ?Justice? party which has a heavily Islamic bent. Shafeeu and the AG both noted that the Islamic Democratic Party had not been approved by the Elections Commission due to irregularities in the petitions submitted. The party has gone to court over this issue (and, while waiting for its legal status to be determined, has an office on the Male? waterfront with a small sign taped in the window).

17. (SBU) Police Chief Adam Zahir told DCM that the events of August 12-13 were unfortunate, but that the police had done everything possible to avoid a confrontation. Nonetheless, MDP supporters did not keep to a planned meeting time and location and made efforts to incite supporters and onlookers. (Note: as reported elsewhere, other eyewitness accounts differ. End Note) The police will be watching the lead-up to September 19 (the second anniversary of the killing of three detainees in prison, which prompted riots in 2003), and are concerned that there may be some agitation among prisoners (Note: the anniversary seems to have passed quietly. End Note). Zahir asked DCM for more training opportunities for police, noting that experience and training are what many officers lack in dealing with these kinds of crowd/protest situations (police officer Riyaz Abdulla, well-known to the Embassy and just returned from the FBI course in Quantico, sat in on the meeting and was ecstatic about his experience). DCM said the USG would continue to look for appropriate training opportunities for the police and told Zahir that the new RSO would call on him during his upcoming initial visit to Male?.

18. (SBU) Human Rights Commission Chairman Ahmed Mujuthuba expressed frustration with the slow pace of the Special Majlis and with the legislation setting up the Human Rights Commission which, in his view, is not in accordance with the Paris Principles which set standards for national human rights commissions. Indeed, Mujuthuba tried to resign over the issue but President Gayoom and other insiders told him that the Special Majlis (when it reconvenes in October) would pass legislation addressing his concerns. Mujuthuba is refusing to go to work until corrective legislation which he deems sufficient is passed. He also bemoaned ?the manner in which democracy is being introduced,? which he described as the government and the MDP shouting at each other but no effort being made for the two sides (which in his view have much in common) to sit down and try to reach accommodation.

MDP Opposed to Gayoom But In Favor Of?

19. (SBU) In a September 14 meeting, MDP leader (and former SAARC Secretary General) Ibrahim Zaki painted Gayoom as out of touch with common Maldivians and forced to reshuffle his cabinet and increase the number of political appointees within the GORM in order to pack the Special Majlis, which has been established to pursue constitutional reform. MDP MP Mohammed Ibrahim Didi said he felt Gayoom might be interested in some measure of reform, but that those around him, who had benefited from his cronyism over the past 27 years, were making it difficult for him to move ahead.

10. (SBU) The MDP representatives had a long list of grievances against Gayoom: increased Islamic radicalism under his watch, corruption, failed tsunami relief and reconstruction efforts and human rights abuses. However, when asked to define their party platform and describe how the MDP would differentiate itself from Gayoom?s rule, they simply said they would develop ?a free and democratic state, a prosperous economy and a happy citizenry.? (Note: it is safe to say that President Gayoom and his officials would claim exactly the same goals ? including a track record of economic growth and recent efforts at democratic

reform. End Note) In a similar vein, the MDP members harped on the need for the ?international community? to do more but, when pinned down on specific additional steps they would like to see the U.S. take, were unable to come up with any.

Tsunami Reconstruction Underway, Slowly but Surely

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11.. (SBU) DCM and Econchief also met with newly-arrived World Bank Rep Richard Scurfield, Deputy Finance Minister Riluwan Shareef and UNDP ResRep Patrice Coeur-Bizot. All three painted a picture of tsunami relief and reconstruction that was marching ahead, hampered somewhat by a lack of absorptive capacity in Maldives, but slowly making headway. Shareef indicated that a significant tsunami reconstruction financing gap (approximately USD 100

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million) still existed and that the increased cost of oil was driving up recurrent expenditures, leaving a growing budget gap. (New Deputy Minister for Tourism Abdul Hameed Zakariyyah, well-known to us from his recently-concluded tenure as Foreign Secretary, told DCM and Econ Chief that resort bookings, a major revenue engine, are currently running at roughly 70%, down from historic highs but significantly up from the immediate post-tsunami period.) UNDP and World Bank will be assisting Maldives in its meetings on the margins of the IMF/WB meetings in Washington with Special UN Representative Clinton and his representatives, with an eye towards increased private sector investment in Maldives as well as additional bilateral assistance. Scurfield said the Bank had decided to open an office, in conjunction with the Asian Development Bank, in an effort to improve capacity in the Finance Ministry, other Ministries with tsunami reconstruction responsibilities and to help push reconstruction decisions forward.

12. DCM and Econchief discussed with Shareef the status of the U.S. tsunami assistance package. Shareef noted that the GORM was pulling together exact language on what U.S. assistance will cover and advised that it should be possible to conclude the agreement by late October (Ramadan begins in early October and is a period of reduced activity in the GORM). DCM and Econchief urged that the U.S. agreement be brought to closure as soon as possible, so that U.S. assistance can get out to those in need and Washington agencies can include the Maldivian program in reporting to Congress on the status of the tsunami supplemental funds. Shareef took the point.

Comment

13. (SBU) Change is afoot in Maldives, though not as quickly as some would like (almost every interlocutor quickly acknowledged that the Special Majlis needs to pick up the pace on constitutional reform). Nonetheless, the registration of parties, the changing face (and average age) of the cabinet and the improved handling of arrests and incarcerations (including the decision to grant the ICRC and EU immediate and full access to detainees) give a sense that Gayoom is serious about progress, but concerned that the pace of reform be carefully managed. We were again struck by how much Gayoom supporters and MDP members have in common when it comes to political and economic philosophies and educational backgrounds, and how many in the MDP are successful products of the Gayoom system. In many regards, the sole point of contention between the two sides seems to be whether one thinks Gayoom is the solution or the problem. The Ambassador will review human rights and democracy progress with the President next week when he and others from the country team are in Maldives for our inaugural U.S.-Maldives Friendship Week. End Comment

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